

# Trainer styles

Barry Johnson and Mandy Geal



## Key learning points

### The main characteristics of:

- Three learner styles – dependent, collaborative and independent.
- Four trainer styles – presenter, classical trainer, experientialist and realist.

## Introduction

This article is not an academic study. It is empirically based around discussions on the subject, and our combined experience of over 45 years. We offer it as a basis for your consideration of your style and, perhaps, for discussions with other trainers and some experimentation in the development of your professionalism.

## Overview

Over the past years, it has become very clear that the trainers we meet and work with have very different styles. What has also become clear is that the trainers' styles relate to their beliefs and values; to the subject material or learning objectives;

to the way they were originally trained and their experience; or to the norms and values of the organisation they work for. For example, we have worked in an organisation that has core values of caring for people but is highly bureaucratic. That impacts upon the training style. We have worked in a service organisation that is so politically correct that trainers must take great care with the phraseology and words they use.

What has also become clear is that some trainers believe the way they do things is the 'right' way and that others should use their style. They are limited by their degree of recognition that other styles exist; if they do recognise other styles, they are then limited by their own skill in using them. Other trainers are very flexible about the style they use.

## Learner versus trainer styles

Jacobs and Fuhrmann<sup>1</sup> identified three types of learner: dependent, collaborative and

independent. These, we feel, are directly linked to the way some trainers see their role. Let's have a look at these learner styles. When we deal with trainer styles, we shall establish some links.

**Dependent learners** have a 'teach me' attitude. They have an expectation that the trainer will take responsibility for their learning. The trainer is expected to determine the course objectives, develop the course content and produce the learning materials. The trainer is also expected to evaluate them, and they tend to believe the trainer's evaluation. It follows that these learners are most comfortable in a highly structured learning environment. Dependent learners who are eager to learn assume they need help, and often need a great deal of support and encouragement if the trainer has an unstructured or learner-centred approach. They may regard such trainers in a negative light.

## Realists

Realists believe that people only really learn in real time in real situations. Some hold the view expressed by Rogers:<sup>3</sup> 'Anything that can be taught to another is relatively inconsequential'.

This is much more learner based, in that the learner is deciding what they want to learn. The realist influences the options of how it might be learned, and then helps the person learn the way they want to achieve their goals.

The common approaches taken by realists are on-the-job training, coaching and counselling. These methods have reality at their core. At one extreme is the on-the-job training that is similar to classical training. Imagine the scene:

The learner is learning to use a computer.  
The trainer says 'What will you do first?'  
The learner replies 'Switch it on.'  
The trainer says 'Go on, then.'

So the process is real, safe, and largely in the hands of the learner. Coaching is similar, with the coach seeking from the learner what they need to learn, how they will know when it has been learned, how it will be learned, and so on.

Finally there is counselling. This is helping the person solve their own problems, from operational problems through to personal problems. (See Issue 19, *Using counselling skills to aid learning*.)

In this style, the trainer exhibits a range of characteristics. As a coach, the realist will emphasise purpose and challenge the learner. They will give feedback and build confidence so that the learner will take risks and try things. As the counsellor, the realist will be sensitive, open, accepting, helpful and non-evaluative.

The realist is primarily relationship centred, taking reality as a given, and focusing on the person within that reality.

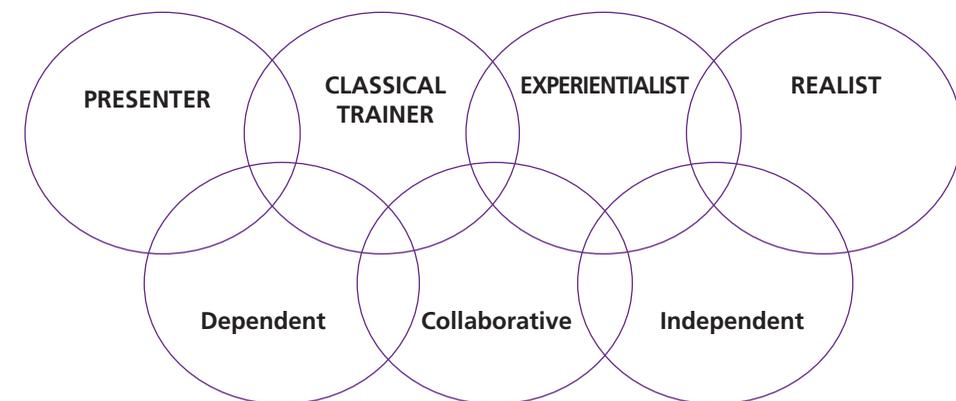
Independent learners often prefer this style, as it gives them the control of their learning and the reality they often seek. Dependents and collaborators may see the trainer using this style as vague and uncommitted, or overpractical and business or company driven.

## Conclusion

Can any of these styles be purely as in our descriptions? Clearly not. Differentiation is as much about how it feels as a matter of the interpersonal, interactive and communication skills used.

## Trainer style

## Learner style



## References

- 1 R. T. Jacobs and B. S. Fuhrmann, 'The concept of learning style', *The 1984 annual: Developing human resources*, J. W. Pfeiffer & L. D. Goodstein (Eds.), San Diego, CA: University Associates, 1984.
- 2 R. Borger and A. E. M. Seaborne, *The Psychology of Learning*, Penguin Books, 1985.
- 3 C. R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, Constable and Robinson, 2004.

## Author

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**Collaborative learners** value collaboration with the trainer in the design and execution of their learning. They have a *Let's learn together* attitude. They want to be able to use their own skills, experience and knowledge and to use the skills, knowledge and experience of other people. The consequence is that they are uncomfortable in highly structured courses where they have not contributed to the objectives and content. Collaborative learners can be the most difficult people on a course, irrespective of the trainer's style, because they often do not recognise the trainer's expertise in structuring and facilitating learning, and require a level of discussion that is irrelevant for people with other learner styles.

**Independent learners** are comfortable working alone. They have a *Help me to help myself learn* attitude. They set their own goals and use the trainer as a resource to achieve them. On courses they will do their own thing, and if they believe what is going on is not of benefit to their goals, they will opt out.

A mismatch of learner styles with the trainer's style may result in poor evaluation of the trainer by the participant, and a style match may result in good evaluations.

### The trainer styles

Observing how people actually conduct their training, and listening to what they believe, has resulted in our consideration of training styles. We believe there are four trainer styles. Some trainers seem to use one of them exclusively, but most trainers mix them – depending on a number of factors, as mentioned in the overview. The four styles we deduced are:

- presenters
- classical trainers
- experientialists
- realists.

### Presenters

This is the style that is widely taught in presentation skills courses and in many Train the Trainer courses, and used by college lecturers. Presenters believe they are dealing with a blank slate with regard to their subject matter. 'Blank slate' is a loose translation from the Latin term *tabula rasa*. The philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) wrote as follows in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

*Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, a white paper void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store, which the*

*busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, Experience.*

The presenter works from the assumption that, in their area of expertise, the learners are starting from scratch. When observing an expert presenter, the high degree of organisation of the presented information is noticeable. The organisation may be:

- from what is known to what is unknown
- from simple to complex
- from a logical build, such as general to specific, or beginning to end, or results to inputs.

The aim is to give a psychological build that enables the learner to accept each element of information. The very best presenters do more than keep people awake; they have a streak of the performer, maintaining attention by entertaining the learners.

As you might expect, their preparation is thorough. You will find evidence of task analysis, lesson planning with sequencing and chaining of information, clear behavioural objectives and well-thought-through audio-visual media.

This whole process is **trainer centred**. The **presenters** see themselves as experts with the role of telling the learners from a position of authority. They may focus too much on their image and how they are presenting information, to the detriment of what is actually learned, but what is to be learned is a major driver in the way they organise the material. There is also a danger of their being overpractical, rigid and ignoring the affective domain. **Dependent learners** prefer their approach.

### Classical trainers

Classical trainers believe the information is within their trainees and their role is to draw it out. This approach has a long history, stemming from the methodology reportedly used by the Greek philosopher, Socrates, to arrive at the truth and teach his students.

When observing expert classical trainers, the way they pose questions is noticeable, spreading them throughout the participants and ensuring all are engaged, and building the information from their answers, while telling them virtually nothing. The structure is engineered to ensure the participants present the main points. These are consolidated by

the trainer, to ensure learning of the elements required as the participants progress towards the course goals. Classical trainers have an ability to structure their questions by predicting the participants' responses and the trail that leads to the learning outcomes. The classical trainer uses interactive behaviours (See Issue 23, *Behavioural analysis in training*), rapport and reframing to create reinforcement<sup>2</sup> of the learning in a Skinnerian type of model. The exceptionally skilled trainer makes it fun, while drawing out from the participants the information, without their having to think deeply. The participants dictate the pace of the learning.

The process is **content centred**. In the 1970s this approach became the basis of 'programmed learning'.

Classical trainers see themselves as a guide. They also see themselves as experts, but their expertise is covert and they gain their reward by observing the realisation of understanding in others. There is a danger that they will be seen as manipulative and so, not be trusted. Classical trainers are manipulative; they withhold information and get learners to provide it.

**Collaborators** prefer this style, and some **dependents** accept it when a high level of support and trust has been built with them and they feel the trainer is emotionally attentive, creating security for them through positive reinforcement and reframing.

### Experientialists

Experientialists believe people learn best from structured experience and will do best what they want to do. This is related to Kolb's Experiential Learning Stages and requires the management of the four styles of learning exposed when the trainer uses this style (See Figure 1).

The experientialist places the participants in situations where they have the opportunity to practise using the skills that need to be learned. The skills practice is 'safe', so the participants have the opportunity to experiment. Ideally the performance of each participant is observed by each other participant, and they give the active participant feedback. The result is that each participant is active and experiences the situation, observes the behaviours and processes used by others, gives feedback on what they have observed and receives feedback on their own performance.

The experientialist has to have the skills of designing the interactive situations. (See Issue 8, *Simulation – making learning real*). Experientialists are learner centred, recognising that the skills and the process each participant learns may be different from what every other participant learns. They are open, and treat people as adults, believing adults know what, why and how they want to learn. Experientialists believe that to impose their own assumptions about what participants should learn is to deny the participants' maturity, and the opportunity to experiment and demonstrate expertise.

The experientialist is a catalyst of learning, believing in letting the participants learn what to do from their successes, and what to stop doing from their mistakes. They will actively build confidence in the participants through recognition and creating opportunities. They may be seen as people who are prepared to allow participants to fail and are insensitive to the apprehension that some learners feel.

**Independent learners** are comfortable with this style as it appeals to their *Help me to help myself learn* attitude.

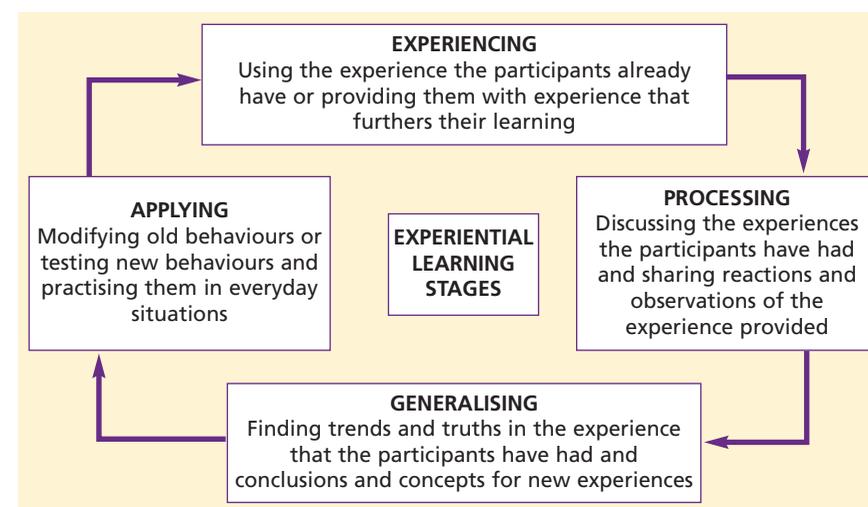


Fig. 1: The four styles of experiential learning